

ON THE EDGE

*Have the
courage to lead
with soul*

BY PARKER J. PALMER

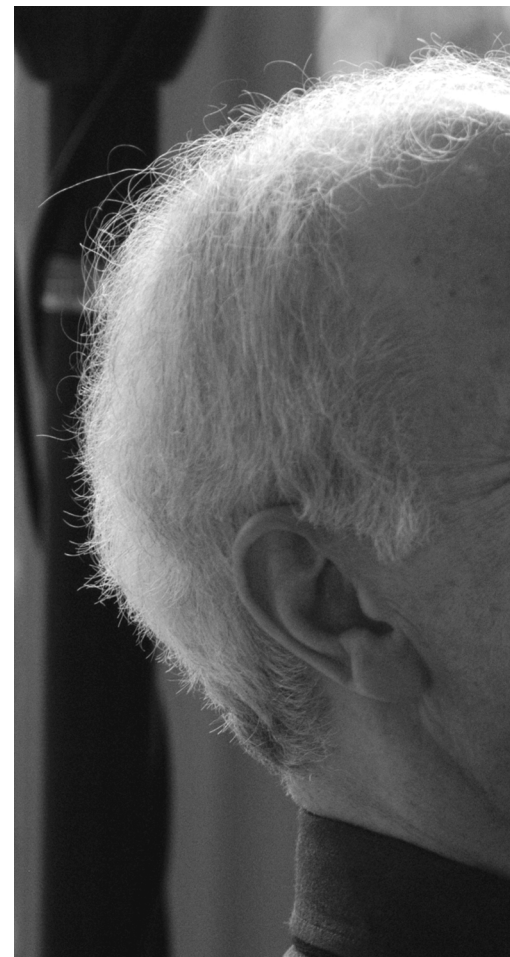
Here is my challenge to school leaders, staff developers, and all who care about public education and the students it is meant to serve: We must go beyond helping educators become better at doing their jobs — as important as that is — and support them in becoming agents of institutional change. It is no longer enough for professionals to do their work well. Today's professionals have an ethical obligation to help transform the toxic settings in which their work is done.

A small story will help me make my point. The Center for Courage & Renewal, which I founded and am privileged to work with, offers long-term group retreats to help people in the serving professions (especially K-12 teachers) renew their professional integrity and rejoin “soul and role.” In

a moment of soul-searching at one of those retreats, a physician said, “The truth is that the health care system I work in has me right on the edge of violating my Hippocratic oath two or three times a week.” Then he spoke again: “You know, I’ve never said that to another person.” After a pause he added, “In fact, I’ve never said that to myself before.”

In recent years, many educators have been hearing a persistent inner voice saying that the educational system has them on the edge of violating their ethical obligations to the young. And once you have heard that challenge from within, you know that it’s not enough simply to become better at what you do, to become a more skillful leader or teacher in an institution that is morally as well as functionally flawed.

Our institutions too often become the worst enemies of their own missions, in part because they operate on signals from another planet. Too much of what goes on in health care is shaped by the insurance industry,



not the values of doctors and nurses. Too much of what goes on in our schools is shaped by politicians who are more interested in winning elections than in winning good futures for our kids, who know that being tough but simplistic about “getting results” wins votes, whether or not it fosters learning.

The consequence is an educational culture that is mechanical, reductionist, competitive, focused on downloading information, and committed to forcing all children to measure up to the same standards regardless of their starting point, their special gifts, or the unique demands and dynamics of their lives. High-stakes testing does violence to the souls of the young, to say nothing of the souls of those who would teach deeply and well — just as the way we finance

agency — the human capacity for individual acts animated by intelligence, insight, wisdom, compassion, and courage. In a culture obsessed with external factors, we need to keep reminding ourselves that, in the absence of personal moral agency, there is no curriculum, no technique, no budget, no management strategy or governance system that will take us where we need to go.

Second, movements for cultural change require collegial community

only offer scant support for personal agency and collegial community, but often work actively to undermine them to protect themselves against challenge and change.

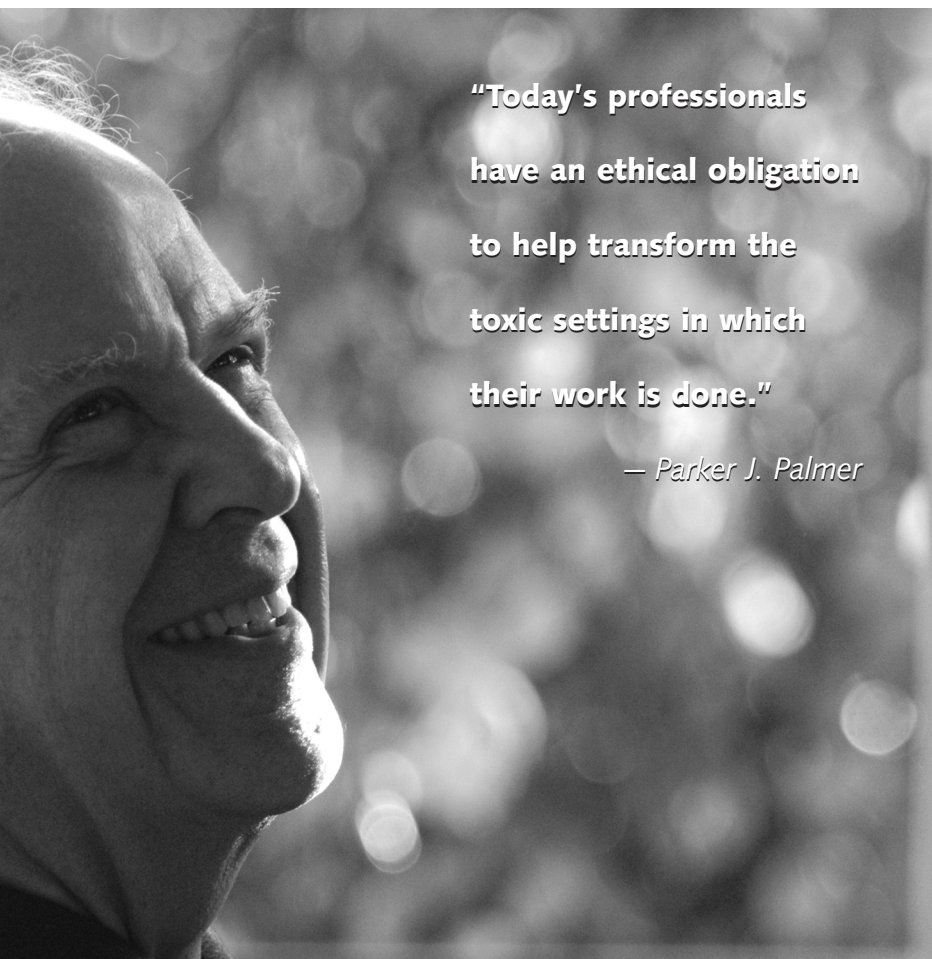
BUILD TRUST IN RELATIONSHIPS

These are not simply talking points for a sermon. We have empirical evidence that in the absence of moral agency and peer community, schools are less likely to grow their capacity to serve the young. Look, for example, at the study by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider on school reform in Chicago during the 1990s (2002). The authors asked a simple question: Why did some Chicago schools get better at educating children during that decade, while others did not?

Bryk and Schneider looked at all of the usual suspects: curriculum, technique, professional development support, models of governance, and, of course, budgets. They found that none of those external variables had significant power to predict who would succeed and who would fail on behalf of kids. But they found one variable that made a huge difference, a variable they call “relational trust.”

If your school had high levels of relational trust and/or leaders who cared about that factor, your chances of getting better at educating children were over 50%. But if your school had low levels of relational trust and/or leaders who did not regard trust as worth attending to, your chances of getting better at educating children were only one out of seven. Significantly, this correlation between relational trust and educational success held strong no matter what happened with those other,

In December 2007, Parker Palmer spoke to attendees of NSDC’s 39th Annual Conference in Dallas about the role of education leaders in changing today’s educational culture. This article, adapted from his keynote speech, serves as a call to collective action for principals and other educators seeking the best outcomes for students.



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Photo by DAN KOWALSKI

Parker J. Palmer is founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal.

health care does violence to the sick and dying and those who would serve them well. How do we go beyond getting better at our jobs to challenge these deformations?

Movements for cultural change require two simple but demanding things. The first is personal moral

— the human capacity to come into relationships that support moral agency, that can inform, critique, inspire, amplify, and sustain acts of individual integrity. If collegial community is lacking, there is no way for individuals to make a difference. And in my experience, our institutions not

external variables: e.g. having the money to do what's needed does not overcome the distrust that keeps us from doing it.

And what lies behind relational trust? One answer is moral agency (e.g. the personal capacity to sideline one's ego for the sake of a larger good) and collegial community (e.g. the collective capacity to collaborate rather than compete). Bryk and Schneider's data suggest that these factors can make or break our capacity to serve children well, that the external variables that we obsess over may be less important than we think. Not that we shouldn't attend to external aspects like money; of course, we should. But when we fail to attend to what goes on within and between people, we're making a huge mistake, a mistake sanctioned by a culture that keeps insisting that we look "out there" for solutions.

FOUR PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

The great promise of staff development is this: It is the one function in schools where we can consistently encourage both personal moral agency and collegial community. But even as I applaud staff developers and the school leaders who support them, I want to suggest four ways of deepening the staff development agenda, four ways to support educators in becoming internal agents of change, four ways to seed a movement in support of the true mission of education. I have written at length about these possibilities in my book,

A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

First, collegial communities cannot be built around work alone. They

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His books include *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1983), *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (Crossroad, 1983), and *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (Servant Leadership School, 1993).

He holds a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, and has been named one of the most influential senior leaders and agenda-setters in higher education.

Living the Questions: Essays Inspired by the Work and Life of Parker J. Palmer was published by Jossey-Bass in 2005.

The Center for Courage & Renewal offers "Courage to Teach" and "Courage to Lead" programs for the personal and professional renewal of public school teachers and leaders, programs designed to "reconnect who you are with what you do." Learn more at www.CourageRenewal.org.

must also be built around honoring the selfhood of the people who do the work. There's a great wound in our culture. Many people feel that they are treated as means to ends in the workplace, not as ends in themselves, leading them to lose heart, to disengage, to withdraw. We must create

teams in the workplace that not only employ the individual but honor the individual, teams that not only help people do a better job but empower the human spirit in the process.

How can we do this? There are a thousand ways, and here's a simple example: Invite more storytelling about people's lives. Start small-group meetings with an optional question that everyone gets two or three minutes to answer (but is always free to take a pass on): "Tell us about an elder who has been important in your life." "Tell us about the first dollar you ever earned." Tell us, that is, about something that helps us know you a little better and enhances your feeling of being known for who you are.

As we practice storytelling in workplaces — where we often spend years alongside each other while learning next to nothing about each other — a simple truth kicks in: The more you know about another person's journey, the less possible it is to distrust or dislike that person. Want to know how to build relational trust? Learn more about each other. Learn it through simple questions that can be tucked into the doing of work, creating workplaces that not only employ people but honor the soul in the process.

This is how to weave a fabric of communal relationships that has resilience in times of crisis, resourcefulness in times of need. It's a fabric that must be woven before the need or the crisis arrives, when it's too late for community to emerge in the stress of the moment. So let's make sure, in our language and in our practice, that we're building collegial communities around persons as well as tasks, around souls as well as roles.

Second, we need to create teams and communities that support people not only in doing outer work — like mastering techniques, planning lessons, and solving problems — but in doing inner work as well.

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Ask yourself once again, “What lies behind relational trust?”

Ultimately, it is not skills of the sort that we normally learn at workshops but the skills required to do “soul work.” It’s becoming aware enough of my own insecurities that I can hold my ego at bay and start relating to you as a colleague rather than a competitor. It’s learning to do the hard work of forgiveness — of you for your failures and of myself for my own failures — without which all roads are dead-ends.

I call this kind of thing “the work before the work.” Normally, we are fully focused on the task immediately at hand — producing the program, creating the curriculum, solving the problem. But if we want to do these

things well, there’s usually prior work to be done.

It’s personal inner work of the sort Montessori teachers do when, prior to entering a classroom, they find a quiet place to meditate for a few moments on the name of each child in their care. And it’s collective inner work, as when a group of health care professionals makes “safe space,” non-judgmental space, for a physician to speak in front of colleagues about the threat to his Hippocratic oath.

Whatever form it takes,

it’s work that builds the relational trust so critical to success in schools.

Third, in order to do inner work, we must go beyond data points, concepts, and theoretical constructs as the foci of our conversations. We must learn to work with images, with metaphors, with poetry, with stories, with music, and with silence. We must tap into a deeper layer of human knowing than can be reached by the intellect alone, a layer evoked by intu-

ition, emotion, aesthetics, and soul.

In summer 1964, Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles was in Oxford, Ohio, as a group of young people got ready to go to Mississippi for what was to become the infamous Freedom Summer. Three of their number — James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner — decided to go ahead of the others and were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

For several days, the young people back in Oxford grieved and agonized: Did they still have the courage to go ahead and make the witness to human equality they had intended to make? Coles reports that they found their courage not in the data of social science, not in nonviolent tactics and strategies, not in mutual exhortation and cheerleading. They found their courage in what Coles calls the “words and the music of social change.” They read poetry, sang songs, and shared images and metaphors that touched, energized and empowered their hearts and connected them with one another (Coles, 1969).

The journey of change I’m talking about requires courage on the part of educators. It requires the courage of being champions for children in a way that may risk your reputation and even put your job on the line. To find that courage, we need to go to a deeper place in ourselves than data points and theories can take us, or than cheerleading for quick fixes can evoke.

Fourth, we must help people reclaim their soul-deep identities as educators as well as the courage to act from that place. As long as our identities are defined by the institutions we work for, we will be powerless to change those institutions, for whatever threatens business as usual in those institutions will threaten our identities, too. Like the doctor whose story I told, we need to find a place to stand outside the self-protective logic of institutions — not because we hate those institutions, but because we love

them and their missions too much to let them sink to their lowest life form.

LIVE ON THE EDGE

Finding alternative ground to stand on is essentially a spiritual decision, and it is the starting point for all great movements for social change. Every movement I’ve studied is sparked by isolated individuals discovering their most fundamental commitments and convictions and deciding to live “divided no more” — deciding that they will no longer behave on the outside in a way that contradicts values and convictions they hold deeply on the inside — and then finding or creating communities, peer communities, collegial communities to support them in that witness.

The doctor who acknowledged that he was on the edge of violating his Hippocratic oath was on another edge as well, deciding whether to commit to an undivided life. Would he make that decision and create a peer community to help him hold and witness to it, or would he bury his own truth and return to business as usual?

That’s a big edge to be on. But it’s precisely the edge we need to be on if we want to transform the school culture into one that helps more and more young people become well-educated and whole. School leaders and staff developers need to help educators stand on that edge with minds and hearts prepared to take the next step.

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